

SAVIOUR OF OUR RICE DIVERSITY

Basudha's yeoman service in preserving traditional rice varieties has **not just preserved forgotten seeds but also created a grassroots network of biodiversity custodians**

By **ARKAMOY DATTA MAJUMDAR**

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A dedicated ecological farm and conservation initiative, Basudha functions as a trust under the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies (CIS), an umbrella organisation working on preserving traditional crop diversity, especially for India's indigenous rice varieties. Basudha ('Earth Mother' in Bengali) now works out of a 1.7-acre farm in a tribal village in the Bissam Cuttack area of Rayagada district in southern Odisha, where farmers and researchers gather and learn about tra-

ditional agricultural practices, organic farming and ecological architecture.

At the heart of its work is the collection and regeneration of indigenous rice varieties. Founder and conservation scientist Debal Deb says over the past many years, he has collected 1,480 varieties of rice, of which some 800 varieties are preserved only on Basudha's farm or in national/international gene banks. Another 180 'rarest' varieties are not known to exist anywhere outside Basudha's farm. To maintain genetic integrity and purity, the centre verifies 56 phenotypic features in each rice variety every year. Deb points out that till the 1970s, the Indian subcontinent hosted an estimated 110,000 distinct varieties of rice. Decades of industrial hybrid seed adoption and modern crop practices have dramatically

SEEDING THE FUTURE
Basudha founder Debal Deb with young farmers and researchers



WHY IT IS A GEM

➤ **Basudha founder Debal Deb has collected 1,480 varieties of traditional rice; only he has 180 'rarest' ones**

➤ **17,000 farmers in 8 states have got seeds from Basudha; 20,000 more now cultivate these grains**

➤ **To maintain genetic purity, the centre verifies 56 phenotypic features in each rice variety every year**

BASUDHA TRUST,
Rayagada, Odisha

Key person: Debal Deb,
Founder, Conservation
scientist

Year of inception: 2001
(Bankura campus), 2012
(Rayagada campus)



BENEFICIARY SPEAK

“This rice has helped maintain my standing in our community. A hectare yields 24 quintals annually. When my relatives or friends visit and we serve it, they are overwhelmed by the aroma and taste”

KRUSHNA KAMHAR, *Farmer from Rayagada*

reduced this diversity, leaving only around 6,000 varieties extant today.

Around 17,000 farmers across eight Indian states have received rice seeds from Basudha, 7,000 of them in Odisha alone. These farmers do not pay for the seeds; instead, they agree to share the benefits with others. With this multiplier effect, another 20,000 farmers have taken up cultivation of these traditional rice forms, creating a grassroots network of biodiversity custodians. Prof. Subhasis Mondal, from the department of plant physiology, Bidhan Chandra Krishi Viswavidyalaya, says, “Basudha’s conservation is not just on paper. It is through participatory farming, which helps these genes

survive and grow.”

Deb worked initially in Bankura, West Bengal, but the lack of interest among farmers there led him to relocate his conservation efforts to Odisha in 2012, where the work has flourished. Over the years, Basudha’s seeds and conservation practices have gained popularity among farming communities not only in eastern India but in states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Maharashtra, where farmers are reviving and cultivating ancestral rice varieties.

To collect the rare seeds, Deb has travelled across states, often in punishing conditions. On one such journey in Bengal, he travelled through relentless rain for a whole day to reach a remote village in Lataguri, in Jalpaiguri district. The goal: collect seeds of a near-forgotten rice variety, Agnishal. “That day,” he remembers, “I was soaked to the bone. But I kept thinking—if I don’t reach today, the seeds may disappear forever.” It is this dedication that has built Basudha’s identity in rice conservation circles all over the world. ■